

Marcello's satirical attack on him in 1720 in *Il teatro alla moda*, on the frontispiece of which Aldaviva, alias Vivaldi, is seen as an angel with a fiddle, wearing a priest's hat, standing on the tiller with one foot raised, as if to beat time. It has been suggested that "on the fiddle" had similar connotations in Italian to those it retains in English. Vivaldi had his enemies.



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VIVALDI

**Famous Concerti
for
Two Trumpets,
Oboe,
Violins,
Cello,
Mandolins**

Antonio Vivaldi (1678 - 1741)

Famous Concerti

Once virtually forgotten, Antonio Vivaldi now enjoys a reputation that equals the international fame he enjoyed in his heyday. Born in Venice in 1678, the son of a barber who was himself to win distinction as a violinist in the service of the great Gabrieli and Monteverdi at the basilica of San Marco, he studied for the priesthood and was ordained in 1703. At the same time he established himself as a violinist of remarkable ability. A later visitor to Venice described his playing in the opera-house in 1715, his use of high positions so that his fingers almost touched the bridge of the violin, leaving little room for the bow, and his contrapuntal cadenza, a fugue played at great speed. The experience, the observer added, was too artificial to be enjoyable. Nevertheless Vivaldi was among the most famous virtuosi of the day, as well as being a prolific composer of music that won wide favour at home and abroad and exercised a far-reaching influence on the music of others.

For much of his life Vivaldi was intermittently associated with the Ospedale della Pietà, one of the four famous foundations in Venice for the education of orphan, illegitimate or indigent girls, a select group of whom were trained as musicians. Venice attracted, then as now, many foreign tourists, and the Pietà and its music long remained a centre of cultural pilgrimage. In 1703, the year of his ordination, Vivaldi, known as *il prete rosso*, the red priest, from the inherited colour of his hair, was appointed violin-master of the pupils of the Pietà. The position was subject to annual renewal by the board of governors, whose voting was not invariably in Vivaldi's favour, particularly as his reputation and consequent obligations outside the orphanage increased. In 1709 he briefly left the Pietà, to be reinstated in 1711. In 1716 he was again removed, to be given, a month later, the title Maestro de' Concerti, director of instrumental music. A year later he left the Pietà for a period of three years spent in Mantua as Maestro di Cappella da Camera to Prince Philip of Hesse-Darmstadt, the German nobleman appointed by the Emperor in Vienna to govern the city.

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By 1720 Vivaldi was again in Venice and in 1723 the relationship with the Pietà was resumed, apparently on a less formal basis. Vivaldi was commissioned to write two new concertos a month, and to rehearse and direct the performance of some of them. The arrangement allowed him to travel and he spent some time in Rome, and indirectly sought possible appointment in Paris through dedicating compositions to Louis XV, although there was no practical result. Vienna seemed to offer more, with the good will of Charles VI, whose inopportune death, when Vivaldi attempted in old age to find employment there, must have proved a very considerable disappointment.

In 1730 Vivaldi visited Bohemia; in 1735 he was appointed again to the position of Maestro de' Concerti at the Pietà and in 1738 he appeared in Amsterdam, where he led the orchestra at the centenary of the Schouwburg Theatre. By 1740, however, Venice had begun to grow tired of Vivaldi, and shortly after the performance of concertos specially written as part of a serenata for the entertainment of the young Prince Friedrich Christian of Saxony his impending departure was announced to the governors of the Pietà, who were asked, and at first refused, to buy some of his concertos.

The following year Vivaldi travelled to Vienna, where he arrived in June, and had time to sell some of the scores he had brought with him, before succumbing to some form of stomach inflammation. He died a month to the day after his arrival and was buried the same day with as little expense as possible. As was remarked in Venice, he had once been worth 50,000 ducats a year, but through his extravagance he died in poverty.

Much of Vivaldi's expenditure was presumably in the opera-house. He was associated from 1714 with the management of the San Angelo Theatre, a second-rate house which nevertheless began to win a name for decent performances, whatever its economies in quality and spectacle. Vivaldi is known to have written some 46 operas, and possible some 40 more than this; he was also involved as composer and entrepreneur in their production in other houses in Italy. It was his work in the opera-house that led to Benedetto